Title
Book Review: Networks Without a Cause by Geert Lovink

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Author
Rivera, Javier de

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Networks Without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media by Geert Lovink. London, U.K.: Polity Press, 2011. 220 pp. ISBN 9780745649672.

Networks Without a Cause offers a provocative and critical review of today's well-established social media. The book departs from the recognition that new media has reached a second phase of maturation, after Wikileaks and the Arab Spring demonstrated the politically crucial dimension of the Internet. This political shift is accompanied by growing criticism over corporations such as Facebook or Google, and a general concern about *Net Neutrality* and regulation of the Internet. In the words of the author, "the friction-free days of a 'multi-stakeholder' governance [of the Internet] are now over," (p. 1) and what comes next is a confusing struggle for the definition of the technological foundations of our society.

Lovink presents a comprehensive review of the state of the art of Net Criticism and proposes new ways of restructuring scholarly study of the Internet. The author assumes the reader is already familiar with the main problems of social media that are addressed throughout the book: psychological confusion due to information overload, pervasive surveillance, impoverishment and fragmentation of public conversation, commoditization of social life, power concentration in tech-companies, and so on. Therefore, now that we have realized that the present state of social media is going in the opposite direction of the "public sphere" dreamed up by Habermas, and that complex mechanisms of governance are operating behind the walls and platforms of our virtual accounts, it is time to organize criticism in a constructive way, a way that helps us to find solutions and search for alternatives.

What Lovink advocates for in this book is a common effort to build and strengthen a humanistic perspective in the understanding and design of new media, in a context where pragmatic technoscientific approaches neglect social reasoning (common sense) in favor of economic interests and libertarian positions. For Lovink, there is a need for "wild thinking" (p. 70) and for the humanities to reclaim their lost territory in defining new media. To such an end, we need to recover from the shocking flow of information produced by the *real time* paradigm, to overcome the rush of trying to catch up with the latest trend, and to regain the analytical and reflexive space that allows us to capture the main features of Net culture. Lovink insists that we need to focus on searching for central, key elements in order to develop strategic concepts that resist the rapid rhythm of changes. These central concepts should not be only analytical, but also performative in that they enable political, cultural, and social initiatives.

This strategic repositioning sets out to establish the ground for *Net Criticism*, based on authors that initiated current theoretical trends, by looking forward to vanishing points around which a major critical perspective can be

organized. Lovink does not forget to mention the most relevant Net Critics (Carr, Morozov, Lanier, Weizenbaum, Vaidhyanathan, Illouz, Berardi, etc.), briefly contextualizing their work in opposing hegemonic discourses of social media that take for granted the actual trends in the development of the Internet. However, there is also a need for a general approach from the humanities and a new beginning for media studies. In this sense, Loving is clear about superseding the apparently convenient merging of old and new media studies: this is not just another type of media, but a completely new media environment that should be studied in itself, because this new realm establishes entirely new rules. In this context, the role of the critic must be redefined in a world that no longer has a canon or recognized principles of authority. "Finally, automatic infantilization happens because Authority is nowhere in sight. Power exists,   but   remains invisible and unnameable. Google permits everything..." (p. 139).

Another relevant argument in favor of the book comes from the cultural background of the author. Based in the Netherlands, Lovink has a privileged position to understand and summarize the different European traditions in Media Criticism, helping to build a theoretical bridge to connect with American scholarship. In this sense, the book has a cosmopolitan flavor that opens us to the complexity and diversity of approaches to new media. In this respect, the comparisons between French blogosphere effervescence and the Germans' reserved attitude towards new media is remarkable – it's reminiscent of Canetti's notes on European national cultures in *Crowds and Power* (1962), an oeuvre cited several times over the book.

The way Lovink articulates new, outstanding authors alongside more established and classical (twentieth century) thinkers—Baudrillard, Manovich and Sassen are also cited several times—produces an interesting combination of depth and extension that makes this book a highly valuable reference for anyone interested in comprehending Net culture from a critical perspective. It can be seen as an introductory book, because it presents all the relevant contributions and portraits of the basic theoretical approaches to the study of social media. But more than that, it is an *opening* book that confronts readers with central problems and questions, inviting them to enter a field in construction, rather than to follow others' theoretical trails. "The goal of Net criticism is to hardwire self-reflexivity into the feedback loop in order to change the architecture. The idea is to develop long-lasting concepts and insights that dig deep into network architectures" (p. 69).

Lovink recognizes that the place of critique in the twenty-first century is at risk. Critics will never be able to catch up with the velocity of technological changes driven by market dynamics. But he also states the importance of saying "no" to easy assumptions and putting to use the creative power of negativism. This attitude towards criticism presents it as a healthy habitus of scholarship that

contradicts the happy liking and the compulsive linking of the social media machine. The aim of this perspective is not only to criticize the hegemonic discourses of the digital era, but also to find a way to articulate the different critical approaches. The collective objective is giving sense to networking and finding *a cause* for building networks. "Rather than trying to defend ourselves against information overload, we can approach the situation creatively, as an opportunity to invent new forms appropriate to our information-rich world" (p. 157).

We learn from Lovink's media activism past in pirate radio that media scarcity helps to create a sense of community that is otherwise diluted with information overload, which, paradoxically, offers us plenty of communication resources. Now that everybody can legally and easily produce their own radio or media channel, the problem is to connect and engage with a community to transmit a cultural message. In other words, the rules for the development of cultural communities have changed radically, and it is the role of new media studies to explain how these new dynamics work. At that point, media studies can merge with cultural activism, because the only way to find out what are the underlying features of community building in the Net is to perform it. In the book, Lovink presents an interesting proposal for cultural initiatives to experiment with new ways of organization that he calls organized networks or *orgnets*. They differ from the idea of networked organizations on the level of commitment between participants who collaborate in cultural projects, "moving the production of culture onto the Net, and so changing the very mode of organization itself" (p. 166).

The book ends with a final chapter on a case study on Wikileaks that reflects on the complexity of techno-politics, and how a small-scale initiative was able to "skyrocket into the realm of high-level international politics" (p. 177). Actually, a great part of the book is composed by case studies that express the ideas of the author through particular features of new media: blogs, YouTube videos, online radio, Facebook, Google and Wikileaks. However, what is lacking in the book is a final chapter that synthesizes all the information the reader has gone through, offering a major conclusion about the path just walked. This increases the sensation of the book being open ended, as if the project started in it were going to be continued in other books.

Scholars from different fields who engage with Lovink's propositions could also provide this continuity. The intention of the book seems to be to encourage humanities scholars' collective reflection on critical studies of Net culture, by providing them with powerful insights and useful references to do so. This "call for reflection" is particularly important for a field such as Information Studies, which, faced with increasing technological complexity, is required to provide a solid theoretical background to explain the social meaning of

information.

References

Canetti, E. (1962). *Crowds and Power*. New York, Viking Press.

Reviewer

Javier de Rivera is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain. His thesis project explores the socialization processes that are created and exposed within the context of new media.